

ERASMUS AT THE COURT OF SATAN.

BY B. U. BURKE.

ERASMUS, absorbed till recently in heavenly contemplation, (for in Paradise many centuries are as a day), decided to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of his publication of the first Greek New Testament, March 1, 1916, by revisiting the earth. He happened to alight in Flanders, where he was much shocked at the course of current events and suspecting the Evil One of a hand in the issue, betook himself to Hell for an explanation. Whereupon the following conversation ensued:

Erasmus. My dear Satan, I come to you fresh from a rapid trip to Earth, to beg of you to explain to me how such a lamentable state of things comes to be in force there. Having verified the date and seen the havoc that is daily being perpetrated, I can only conclude that you have contrived some method of persuading the globe to revolve backward. Now when I left the Earth I had already started and set in motion an excellent humanistic movement, which bade fair to put the world on the right path to universal brotherhood and to aid all those coming after me along the straight road of common sense. What then has become of the fruits of my labor, and who but you can have thus brought them to naught?

Satan. Truly, my dear Erasmus, such credit from a man of your penetration and clarity of intellect flatters me, and indeed I pride myself that the scheme by which I have arrived at such results has not been altogether without ingenuity. The world, as you say, had acquired a perceptible impetus in the direction of goodness from the example of yourself and others like you. The danger lay not so much with the leaders as in the fact that the seeds of good began to be disseminated among the people at large, and the world showed a dangerous tendency to become moral as a result of it. I therefore hit upon a plan which, as I said, I pride myself was not

without ingenuity. I took unto myself the principle of nationality, evolving and perfecting it to my own ends.

Erasmus. But why, Satan, put yourself to so much trouble? Why not have been content with the great amount of evil that is in any case existent in the world, and have lived in peace on that?

Satan. Ah, Erasmus, it is easy to see where you have been! It is to be regretted that no one ever visits those Elysian Fields without getting softening of the intellect. I assure you, if I ceased my exertions the world would be good in no time, and there would soon be no air left for me to breathe. Besides—a world either wholly good or wholly bad would be insufferable, there would be no snap, no spice to it, and a man of your reason would have been the first to admit this when you were upon Earth.

Erasmus. Expound to me then this scheme of nationalism, for I confess the whole matter is obscure to me.

Satan. Here then in brief is my receipt. The world being already divided as you know by varied tongues and natural geographical boundaries, I took pains to encourage this division more and more, inducing the men of various races to fraternize together instead of mingling with each other, and aiding by every means in my power the establishment of conventional states with, wherever possible, hereditary rulers. Some thought in time to elude me by the establishment of republics and there has been much vain talk of democracy, but men have as yet no true realization of this last, and I have found that a president can be as useful to my schemes as a crowned monarch. Granted then, the world split into distinct nations with definite boundaries, each with a man or group of men at the head of its affairs, and all the energy of the bulk of its members expended within its boundaries for their mutual cultivation and consolidation. These conditions I then soldered together with a cement of patriotism of my own brewing, the ingredients being: overweening conceit of the land of birth; the tendency to consider that everything to do with it, people, produce, language and all else are of necessity superior to similar products of other nations; the quality of being supersensitive as to this superexcellence and treating with high scorn any manifestations of proof to the contrary. These and a few other minor matters constitute, as you see, my dear Erasmus, a powerful potion; and believe me, the emotional enthusiasms engendered by it are potent almost beyond belief.

Erasmus. Nay, that I can well understand, but how then should such motives work for evil, for though limited in vision they are certainly not altogether evil in themselves, and such cooperation

should have tended to unprecedented development? Indeed no such unity of purpose was dreamed of while I lived.

Satan. My objects were furthered in this way: that such union tended, by concentrating the gaze of the various nations on themselves, to blind them to their universal kinship, and consequently to develop in each unlimited national selfishness in proportion as each increased in prestige, power and wealth. Of course as long as the plan was in its infancy it worked for their good and I had a proportionately lean time, but I was prepared to wait until the scheme was ripe and am content with the result. For as the confines of the Earth have not expanded in proportion with the growth of these rival powers, it followed as a matter of course that in time they came to rub elbows and get seriously in each other's way, and each being convinced that they had attained to the one true solution of right living, (their ways all being ludicrously alike, did they but realize it), the moment these conceptions clashed they fell upon each other as you have seen, and the very intensity of their feelings of patriotism and nationality are keeping them at each others' throats and are likely to do so. Oh! It is indeed a great war such as there never was before, and I am glad to think, Erasmus, that you have seen something of it. I have as my abettors many marvelous scientists on all sides, and scarcely a week passes but they produce some scheme of annihilation more delightfully wicked than any that has gone before. I have in fact been obliged to add new furnaces of especial power in anticipation of their advent in my kingdom, for I cannot risk having my contrivances considered old-fashioned by mere mortals, however ingenious they may be.

Erasmus. But how then, Satan, are you benefited by war if the fighting units believe in their own ends and fight, not from desire of the conflict, but from a sense of duty?

Satan. How? Because no matter how they start the great majority are sooner or later brutalized by it. All their ignoble instincts are aroused and the evil passions that I most delight in are loosed upon the Earth and engender a riotous profusion of crime. The hate aroused too is as incense to my nostrils and I am even now casting about in my mind for a means of perpetuating it.

Erasmus. But how came it that such a very obvious danger as the clashing of so many interests should not have been foreseen and prepared against?

Satan. Oh, it was both by a certain faction, and they even went so far as to build a Peace Palace at the Hague with the special

object of thwarting my designs. That, I admit, gave me a bad moment, but there turned out to be after all only a very small body who cared about peace one way or the other at the time they had it, and the vast majority were too wrapt up in their own lives to pay any serious attention to public matters. I made it a point to see that as many as possible were engrossed in their own affairs to the exclusion of all else, thus leaving full control in the hands of their leaders, on whom I knew of course I could implicitly rely.

Erasmus. One thing still puzzles me. How then about the Christian doctrine, which is utterly opposed to all such slaughter? It cannot surely have died out, yet the modern methods seem analogous only with those of the Old Testament.

Satan. On the contrary, Christianity is flourishing as never before. It has been reduced to such a science that it can now be adapted to fit any needs or prove any ends. Indeed I have among the priests of all denominations some of my most zealous helpers, for they preach the continuance of hostilities and the righteousness of enmity even from their pulpits, and how should their followers suspect evil where they themselves are in good faith!

At this Erasmus groaned with horror and the Devil indulged in a very orgy of mirth. "That indeed is the cream of the entire situation," he continued, when he had sufficiently recovered to speak again, "that all this, my work, is being most solemnly waged in the name of the Most High!" and he guffawed again with even greater enjoyment. But Erasmus was too sickened with these last ideas to keep his temper longer. That poor innocent mortals, acting in good faith and living up to their principles (even if these principles were false), could be made all unconsciously to do the work of the Devil, even as in his own day; and that the centuries should have brought no improvement in such matters, clearly as he had demonstrated the evils of imposture and strife, seemed to him too horrible to be borne, and he left hurriedly, cursing the Devil with all the evil epithets formerly known to him.

But Satan only laughed the louder, for he well knew that to have made even the level-headed Sage of Rotterdam lose his equanimity was certain proof that he, Satan, was accomplishing more evil than he had ever managed to achieve before.